The Africa Palm Oil Initiative: highlights 2019-2020
Introduction

Palm oil is one of the world’s most important agricultural commodities. The industry has pumped billions into the economies of countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, but its rapid expansion has become synonymous with widespread negative environmental and social issues including deforestation and conversion of native vegetation alongside labour and human rights concerns.

To address this in Africa where there was an acceleration of oil palm expansion from the early 2010s, the Tropical Forest Alliance (TFA) Africa Palm Oil Initiative (APOI) is contributing to the creation of an environment that makes it possible for expansion of oil palm in Africa to be sustainable. The approach aims to combine plantation development with smallholder models operating in a way that protects forests and human rights and provides local communities with genuine economic opportunities and improved livelihoods.

The APOI’s vision is a prosperous palm oil industry which brings jobs and wealth to local communities in a way that is environmentally and socially sustainable and protects the rich tropical forests of the region.

The Initiative seeks to achieve this through the development and implementation of national and regional principles for responsible palm oil development that takes into account the development plans of countries in Africa, while addressing environmental targets for reduced deforestation, land use and greenhouse gases, and social indicators on issues such as land tenure and the rights of indigenous peoples.

The Initiative brings together partners from ten palm oil-producing countries: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Liberia, Edo State in Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, and Sierra Leone. The APOI is a collaboration between African governments and the private sector with support from civil society organisations. Stakeholders from governments, companies, civil society, and indigenous and local communities work together at national and regional levels. The APOI is TFA’s first Signature Initiative coordinated by Proforest on behalf of TFA in partnership with a range of regional and national institutions.

The 10 APOI countries have each followed a three-phase process: engagement, development and implementation. National Principles and Action Plans were developed to guide the implementation of sustainable palm oil production in each country.

To ensure the coordination and success of the national principles and action plans, multi-stakeholder national platforms were established during the development phase to facilitate the implementation process.

This report details highlights from APOI during its implementation phase over the past year.
Coordination and alignment for collective action

The APOI national platforms have acted as a crucial coordination point to engage with other initiatives, thereby harmonising and aligning activities at a national level instead of leading to a proliferation of initiatives doing separate project work. This also forms a basis for engagement with large multinational initiatives such as the Central African Forests Initiative (CAFI).

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the national platform has aligned its vision for collective action with the government’s 2020-2030 strategic national development plan, which has been validated by the government and is currently being implemented. The APOI platform in turn has aligned its work with DRC’s national 2016-2021 REDD readiness planning, also with funding from CAFI, as well as the government’s national plan for agricultural investment, which is currently undergoing development. The platform’s unique position and versatility has allowed it to play a pivotal role in being able to align its objectives with all of these different initiatives allowing each to complement the work of the others.

In Edo State, Nigeria, IDH has identified the APOI state platform as an effective multi-stakeholder platform and are currently working with the platform to deliver their new programme called National Initiative for Sustainable Climate Smart Oil Palm Smallholder (NISCOPS). The APOI platform and IDH plan to address challenges that have an impact on the livelihoods of smallholder producers in the region, who have struggled to produce and sell their Fresh Fruit Bunches, hindered by low productivity leading to low profits.

In Cameroon, the stakeholders have worked to better align existing initiatives and programmes with the national action plan, such as the REDD+ programme and the stakeholders participating in the development of the Accountability Framework Initiative, who were invited to be members of APOI. This allows for the pooling of objectives of the various initiatives and saves time in the implementation of the APOI action plan.

Asunafo-Asutifi Landscape

Asunafo and Asutifi Districts are within one of the Hotspot Intervention Areas (HIAs) identified by the Ghana Forestry Commission as a key zone for REDD+. Private sector engagement in REDD+ is being supported through the Cocoa and Forest Initiative Joint Framework for Action, which the Government of Ghana and around 30 cocoa supply chain companies have signed up to. With many companies now seeking to establish more sustainable cocoa supply chains, there is a need for a mechanism to build collaboration among the companies and government actors in developing and implementing the landscape programme.

APOI and Proforest’s Production Landscape Programme, both funded by UK Aid, joined forces to provide neutral technical facilitation, working with partners including the World Cocoa Foundation, Ghana’s cocoa board (COCOBOD), Forestry Commission and the private sector companies who have developed the Asunafo-Asutifi landscape programme. The landscape programme has now attracted eight large private sector companies. The World Cocoa Foundation acts as an intermediary between Proforest and the eight companies. These companies are all looking to adopt a more sustainable approach to their cocoa supply chains.

The companies are funding the baseline studies that will underpin a joint landscape management and investment plan in line with the Ghana Cocoa Forests REDD+ Programme implementation procedure. The plans will allow the companies to calculate their contributions to Ghana’s emissions reductions targets, thereby fulfilling their commitments to the Cocoa and Forests Initiative Joint Framework for Action. This case demonstrates how a neutral facilitator can create an enabling environment to encourage companies to work together in the landscape rather than in competition with each other.
In Ghana too, the APOI has always sought to build on existing initiatives and build strong alliances as they work towards a vision of a sustainable palm oil subsector. The platform has worked with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture and local government to train agricultural extension and regional extension officers to equip them as part of the government’s Planting for Food and Jobs Initiative. The platform is also working closely with the Climate Change Department of the Forestry Commission, a platform member, to use a landscape/jurisdictional approach to reducing deforestation and emissions reduction in Ghana. The Forestry Commission presented its approach to implementing the Ghana Cocoa Forest and REDD+ Programme (GCFRP) at the APOI Regional meeting and the TFA General Assembly meeting held in Ghana in May 2018, aimed at forging partnerships to help with the implementation of this jurisdictional approach programme.

Through the work of the APOI national platform and key stakeholders including the Oil Palm Development Association of Ghana (OPDAG) the process began to establish the Tree Crops Development Authority, which will regulate palm oil, shea, rubber, mango, coconut and cashew crops in the country. The bill was presented to Parliament after stakeholder meetings, one of which was funded by the APOI platform, and was passed on December 2nd, 2019. The Tree Crops Development Authority was inaugurated on 28th September 2020, and the APOI platform provided technical support for this.

This achievement has been crucial as without the authority and legal backing, palm oil farmers have been working in isolation, there has been duplication of effort, and the sector has not been able to present their challenges with a common voice. Smallholders are the most affected by this because they are unable to receive the support they need to increase productivity. The Tree Crops Development Authority makes it mandatory for all actors in the sectors they regulate to register within a set time - this will give an accurate picture of production in Ghana whilst helping planning to ensure that targeted help for achieving sustainable production of these commodities is made available to those who most need it.

It will also help in issues such as the smuggling of palm oil and palm oil derivatives, which has been a concern for the industry. With the inclusion of other tree crops into the Act there is now the opportunity for cross-learning with regards to sustainable production - lessons from the APOI can inform the other tree crops so sustainable production is not limited to isolated pockets, but standardised across a larger landscape.

From APOI principles to government Act - the process in stages

1. The Ghana national platform worked closely with stakeholders to set the agenda and engage with government to pursue the oil palm development board which has metamorphosed into the Tree Crops Development Authority.

2. APOI National Platform members were actively part of the drafting of the Bill establishing the authority.

3. The platform co-funded the first Parliamentary Review Meeting where the Attorney General’s Department presented the bill to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Food, Agriculture and Cocoa, subjected the Bill to scrutiny and made inputs so that it could be finally approved.

4. The Ghana National Platform continues to give technical assistance to the Tree Crops Development Authority Implementation Committee as it works towards operationalising the authority.

... lessons from the APOI can inform the other tree crops so information is shared between crops and sectors across a larger landscape.
The National Oil Palm Platform of Liberia (NOPPOL) is hosted by the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and has been supported by APOI and UNDP’s Good Growth Partnership (GGP) which is financed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF). The GGP support has led to the establishment of the secretariat at the Ministry, and the recruitment of a full time platform manager and communications manager to support the effective functioning of the platform.

The establishment of the national oil palm steering committee and increase in the participation of government agencies has demonstrated the political will and interest on the part of the government in achieving sustainable production and using best practices.

Covid-19 Adaptation

- National Platforms have adapted to the Covid-19 restrictions on movement and meetings using different technologies to continue working safely and effectively throughout the pandemic. Some examples are:
  - The Edo State whatsapp group, already established so platform members could share issues and concerns related to sustainable palm oil production, has been used to continue creation of their platform impact document. This has now been finalised, with all participants co-creating remotely
  - Gabon also started a whatsapp group for RSPO National Interpretation revision and now uses it for general communications, along with using webinars to finalise Gabon’s RSPO NI
  - Liberia and Republic of Congo have been using online technologies to continue their platform meetings

The establishment of Liberia’s national oil palm steering committee and increase in the participation of government agencies has demonstrated the political will and interest on the part of the government in achieving sustainable production and using best practices.

The Sierra Leone APOI national platform is working collaboratively with FAO, UNDP and the Ministry of Lands, where the Voluntary Guidance on Governance and Tenure (VGGT) secretariat sits. This means that the platform members participate in national forum meetings to discuss issues affecting forests, communities and palm oil production. Platform meetings raise concerns about land, forest depletion and concerns raised by communities.

In the Central African Republic the APOI framework was used as the basis of a proposal for a ministerial order submitted to the Minister of Agriculture. This subsequently led to the creation of the APOI national platform for the oil palm sector by the Minister of Agriculture’s Decree.

This brings together all stakeholders and meets regularly at the invitation of the Chief of Staff, a representative of the Minister. This platform performs the function of an umbrella structure for the palm sector and promotes the sector’s development in a way that respects the environment and is socially equitable.

The Côte d’Ivoire national platform has gone beyond the oil palm supply chain and has met with cocoa and rubber companies to assess the level of deforestation for the different sectors. The platform was invited by the government to input into the redevelopment of its forestry policy, which has now been expanded to cover agroforestry.

The government is now putting into place a zero-deforestation platform as part of its REDD+ development work, and the APOI national platform will be a part of this, along with all commodity and mining sectors.
Legal, regulatory and policy framework

Land use planning forms an integral part of APOI principles and actions in countries where land use issues remain. APOI is supporting the Republic of the Congo and Edo State platforms to develop Free, Prior & Informed Consent (FPIC) guidelines where indigenous peoples and local CSOs were involved in the process.

The FPIC process will ensure that local communities give their informed consent prior to land allocation to ensure the use of the land for oil palm development does not significantly affect their access to land for other uses including subsistence farming. APOI also supports the use of High Conservation Value (HCV) and High Carbon Stock (HCS) approaches to land use within agricultural landscapes. This ensures social and environmental conservation areas within agricultural landscapes are excluded from industrial agro-commodity development.

The contribution of all these measures to sustainable land use is significant as the responsible oil palm development principles and action plans are intended to maximise environmental and social sustainability outcomes while supporting economic development goals at jurisdictional and landscape scale in West and Central Africa.

In Sierra Leone the government is working with partners and stakeholders to form a national land commission to address related issues through a voluntary guideline on governance and tenure (VGGT). Through the APOI process the platform has been able to introduce FPIC into this land acquisition process, which aims to solve large scale land acquisition problems between the government, multinational companies and the landowners.

National Platform facilitator Solidaridad acted as co-chair for the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil National Interpretations (RSPO NI) secretariat in Côte d’Ivoire under APOI. The NI draft document was endorsed by the RSPO Board of Governance (BoG) during the last Board Meeting held on 25th June 2020. The new NI document came into effect immediately after the release of the official announcement on the RSPO website.

In Gabon, one major success came from the private sector, government and civil society organisations agreeing to support the RSPO National Interpretation for Gabon, involving several working sessions with the Directorate General of Agriculture. This contribution from the different partners helped to support the local public consultation activities of the national interpretation which fell outside of official co-facilitation budgets, thereby advancing the NI process. The APOI platform has been used as a hub for the discussions and revisions of the RSPO NI. The process was jointly funded by the APOI, RSPO, WWF and Olam. As part of the revision of the NI a series of activities took place consisting of consultation meetings and webinars, with Proforest facilitating the revision. The Gabon NI has now been approved by RSPO.

In Ghana participation and engagement in platform meetings of high-level government officials has led to APOI principles and actions becoming part of government policy. When the APOI started in Ghana in 2015, stakeholders recognised that a major gap was the absence of a regulatory body to ensure that best practices are adhered to and development activities are prioritised. The platform aimed to address this in its principles (see box 1 for details).
Box 1
Principle:
7. Legal Framework/Policy/Governance

“Sustainable oil palm production shall be governed by clear policy and legal framework, with a well-structured value chain where all actors belong to a decentralized governance system supervised by a regulatory body…”.

Uptake and implementation of sustainability requirements

The APOI process in each country has always been set up to move beyond the creation of principles and plans, to the implementation of these sustainability practices in the sector. The success of this is evidenced in several examples from APOI countries.

In the Central African Republic strategic alliances were forged with key partners, which improved the alignment of partnership efforts, shared goals and shared proposal development. A collaborative protocol between the national platform and the Palm d’Or agribusiness (a private company) has been signed to help build capacity on good oil palm planting practices. Best Management Practices training is to be carried out in the next phase of this partnership.

In Sierra Leone trainees and staff of SOCFIN have integrated FPIC, HCV and HCS considerations into their operational management plans as a result of APOI training. This will help to manage ecosystems, increase forest cover and carbon sink, as well as increase biodiversity within the plantations. Trainees are cascading the training to other staff members of the company. APOI is playing a supervisory role for companies involved in this training process and raises awareness amongst companies and communities via radio programmes, public lectures and conservation roadshows.

A collaborative protocol between the CAR national platform and the Palm d’Or agribusiness (a private company) has been signed to help build capacity on good oil palm planting practices.

Côte d’Ivoire’s facilitator Solidaridad has developed the tools to train oil palm smallholders regarding HVC and Best Management Practice under oil palm programmes (a RSSF group certification project with RSPO, and a project with ALDI). The development of the training tools for smallholders in Côte d’Ivoire is part of the TFA APOI National Principle Plan adopted by the country in 2016. The tools were tested and then finalised during the workshop organised by APOI.

Responsible production of palm as being defined under APOI places a high importance on smallholder inclusion in the palm oil supply chain, community benefits and addressing gender and land rights in an equitable way. Specifically, based on the commitment under APOI, some of the countries including Edo State, Nigeria have made smallholder development an integral part of concession allocations to companies. This smallholder inclusive approach to oil palm development has the potential to provide jobs and improve the incomes and livelihood of local communities in the oil palm growing regions of West and Central Africa.

APOI has brought in major company players in Africa, such as the SOCFIN and SIAT groups to become TFA Partners. This delivers important impacts, as the companies have committed to remove deforestation, not only from their palm oil supply chains, but also from other commodities they produce such as rubber. The process has also resulted in increased adoption of RSPO compliance management requirements even at national (eg Gabon) and state level (eg Edo State) and by many companies in the region.
In Ghana, the influence of BOPP (Benso Oil Palm Plantation) and other stakeholders on the APOI national principles led to the development and piloting of a smallholder model which is modelled around inclusion of marginalised groups particularly smallholders and in line with Principle 4 of Ghana’s APOI Principles and Action(s):

BOPP is working with funding from Partnership for Forests to implement the Adum Smallholder Programme, which aims to reduce the dependence of smallholders on oil palm, and reducing the need to further expand into forests to increase yields.

It is hoped that the outcomes of this Adum Smallholder Programme will be shared with the national platform and the Tree Crop Development Authority as an example of forest protection and sustainable oil palm production. BOPP is one of the leading member stakeholders in the APOI process and has shaped the growth of the platform.

As an RSPO certified member they have brought their learnings to the wider group of platform members and are at the forefront of advocating for smallholders in the sector.

**Livelihood/Smallholders/Outgrowers**

Sustainable oil palm production in Ghana shall be undertaken in a manner that protects, improves and sustains rural livelihoods and the rights of outgrowers/smallholders in the sector through their effective participation in policy formulation, their implementation, fresh fruit bunch pricing and initiatives targeted at increasing productivity..."
Inclusion and gender equality

The APOI recognises that the palm oil sector cannot develop sustainably without the inclusion of marginalised groups: women, indigenous peoples, local communities, and smallholders. In the APOI process, national platforms ensure that marginalised groups are included in workshops and decision-making processes, giving members of these groups a voice.

Gender considerations are particularly important for natural resource management, including palm oil. The need to promote gender equality and inclusion of smallholder development in national palm oil development strategies is noted in the Marrakesh Declaration and features in most countries’ action plans. Since the signing of the Declaration there have been some notable successes in ensuring the meaningful contributions of marginalised groups in the APOI countries. In all countries the goal is to have marginalised groups, including women, smallholders and indigenous groups fairly represented in decision making during meetings of the national platform.

In Ghana’s recent Tree Crops Development Authority Implementation Committee meeting to decide on the governance structure of the Authority, the APOI team led by Nana Ama Yirrah, gender and social inclusion specialist and CEO of Colandef, were the only participants to advocate for the inclusion of women on the governance board. This led to the chair of the implementation committee stating that a quota be allocated to women to make sure they can contribute to the process. The APOI platform has also taken steps to ensure that smallholders are considered in decision making processes - as a result a representation is to be elected from the membership of the Oil Palm Development Association of Ghana (OPDAG). This is a significant achievement as it ensures that no group is left behind - marginalised groups can bring their experiences to the strategy process to develop the sector sustainably.

Communicating progress

In 2019-20 all national platforms had an intense focus on communications - to promote their own work as a platform, the work of platform member organisations contributing to their successes, and to raise awareness in-country of the benefits to communities and growers of more sustainable methods. Each country developed their plan with their own specific circumstances and national target audiences in mind, with some notable successes.

In Edo State one communications campaign has had a massive impact - raising awareness of the successes in Edo has caused a further 6 other palm oil producing states in Nigeria to join the platform.

The campaign was centred around material produced showing stakeholders how to get involved in the platform and outlining the aims and processes of APOI. The facilitator used this information at conferences held in the state and beyond at the NEXIM Bank South Forum 2020, which attracted CEOs, governors from other states, the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria and palm oil producers and processors.

At the following platform meeting they discussed how to expand the Edo State platform into a Regional platform, with the addition of the six other states of the Niger Delta geopolitical region - Ondo State, River State, Bayelsa, Cross-Rivers, Delta, and Awka-Iborn State.
Communications newsletters from APOI country platforms

Various country platforms have produced newsletters to send within their countries to encourage further participation and showcase their successes - these are linked below:


Other communications materials have been produced by the national platforms, including radio broadcasts, newspaper articles and documentary film footage.
Recent APOI briefings

Moving towards sustainable production: the Africa Palm Oil Initiative impact report - 2019

Shifting towards sustainability: How the APOI is changing palm oil production in West and Central Africa - 2019

Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis of Customary Practices in Oil Palm Producing Areas and the Africa Palm Oil Initiative process in Ghana - 2018
Contact details
For further information contact Nadia Goodman at apoi@proforest.net

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